DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 039 856 HE 001 588

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TITLE Alternative Models for Higher Education.
INSTITUTION American Association for Higher Education, Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE 3 Mar 70
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the 25th national conference of the American Association for Higher Education, Chicago, Illinois, March 3, 1970

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.55
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Objectives, Educational Planning, *Higher Education, *Institutional Role, *Models, Planning

ABSTRACT

Higher education is beset from all sides by criticism, fear, doubt, uncertainty, and prophecies of doom. While the young call for change, the faculty often resist anything that might reduce their privileges and prerogatives. Before alternative models to the present system of higher education can be considered, it is useful to question present practices, and past customs. The usefulness or desirability of each of these practices and traditions would dictate an alternative model for higher education. Among the proposed models are: (1) the experimental model - universities without walls, or the city as university; (2) the university whose main objective is "relevance"; (3) the university that provides education for leisure; (4) the university as a shelter for part of the population; (5) the university as producer of people who can make things work; (6) the university as a training ground for survival. The university can be considered a self-service supermarket with an inspection station at the end, or as a factory or processing plant. If alternative models are considered, nothing must be assumed as inherently virtuous or corrupt. (AF)

ED039856

Group 38
Tuesday Morning, March 3

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ALTERNATIVE MODELS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION*

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Harold J. Noah, reviewing a book suitably titled ACADEMIA IN ANARCHY (SR, Feb. 21, 1970, pp. 74-75), says, "The modern university is a house of straw, held together precariously, if at all, only by the inertia of ancient traditions observed still by faculty and administration but increasingly and overwhelmingly rejected by students." Summarizing the hard-fisted economic analysis of the authors, Noah concludes that

> Universities are peculiar places where the consumers (the students) do not pay the full economic cost of the services they receive, the producers (the faculty) do not sell the services they give, and those who pay for all this largesse (the taxpayers) are carefully denied control over the institutions they finance.

From all sides we hear criticism, fear, doubt, uncertainty, and prophecies of doom. One does not have to read far in either professional or lay discussion of higher education today before gathering impressions which might support the conclusion that just about everything that could go wrong either has or shortly will. More ominous than the cries of student reformers are the signs that reactionary leaders, like Reagan and Nixon, can inflict further punishment by zeroing in on the Achilles heel--money. Dependence on vast external and public support--even in the private sector--has made the whole system seem very fragile. The protective inertia which Noah points out may not suffice.

Indeed, a dispassionate observer of the present academic scene (who had better keep his dispassion to himself) might point out that in the last few years the predominant characteristic--or, at any rate, the most strikingly evident--of the present generation of young, fresh academicians is that, far from succumbing to "the inertia of ancient traditions," they want to change many things. In my own case, when teaching palled on me after a few years, I left it and went into another line of work--several times, as a matter of fact. I don't think it ever crossed my mind to try to shake the system and change it to my liking. I vaguely thought that I might aspire to positions of influence in my later years and then perhaps change some of the things I really didn't like. The wisdom of my later years has been the discovery that that isn't the way it's done.

Occasionally, I get an idea for a cartoon, and, since I cannot draw myself, about all I can do is tell people what I would draw if I could. One of my favorites requires the macabre touch of Charles Addams; a dark and gloomy street, disappearing in the murk, has two signs at the corner. One points toward the darkness and says ONE WAY, and the other says DEAD END.

HE001 588

*Paper presented to Discussion Group 38 on "Models of institutions for the future" at the 25th National Conference on Higher Education, sponsored by the American Association for Higher Education, Tuesday, March 3, 1970. Permission to quote restricted.

It seems almost as if higher education were in a cul-de-sac with umburstable walls. In front is the wall of faculty resistance to changes which will in any way reduce their privileges and prerogatives. At one side are the rigidities of existing buildings, laws, resources; at the other side is the increasing resistance of the fund-sources. And pushing from behind, driving us into the apparent corner, is the relentless mass pressure for more education for more young people for more relevant ends--and the clamor for the university to accept yet additional responsibilities for solving society's problems.

Faced with such a mixture of expansion and constriction, many have begun to question the value of our present models of higher education and to think of alternatives.

One possible way of generating alternative models is to examine the present ones as we might if we were obliged to explain them to someone from another culture or another planet. As we consider each identifying feature, we then ask, Isn't there another way of doing that? Or, Why do you do that? If the answers are convincing, we may relive the historical process of reducing alternatives and come up at last with the same system we have now, in which case we are in very bad trouble. However, many of the answers will be I don't know, or We've always done it that way, or Because of the law, or The faculty would rebel if we didn't, and so on.

Setting aside for the moment the defenses provided for present practices by past customs, traditions, etc., and setting aside, too, the current crises in resource generation and allocation, it may be useful to challenge some of the sacred cows. Each question implies one or more alternative models and suggests rather than exhausts the possibilities.

1. Does everybody really need 12 years of grade school before going on to college?

2. Why should we limit formal instruction to certain seasons, days of the week, and hours?

3. Does it take four years to pass all the endurance tests to qualify for a degree? Conversely, what's the hurry? Why not five, or six?

4. Is everybody at the normal age for graduation from high school ripe for the college experience?

5. Do young people have to go away from home and live in another place in order to gain an education? Conversely, do young people have to live in groups? (Do the few remaining parietal requirements really prevent anything we don't think should happen?)

6. What do students learn in a classroom that they couldn't learn from reading the lectures?

7. What effect do we have on the structure of knowledge by chopping it into blocks of a size convenient for presentation three times a week for 15 weeks?

8. Could some subjects or skills be better taught by a computer than by a human being? Why, or why not?

9. Are the ways in which we now "measure" learning really valid?

10. What would be the implications of making four (or X) years of post-secondary education compulsory as well as universal?

11. Would it really damage the academic profession to teach potential professors something about how learning takes place?

12. Do we really feel safe in basing accreditation on variables of untested validity? Rather than a yes-no accreditation, why not a quality rating scale?

13. If it is important for young people to have degrees in order to gain admittance to certain vocational or occupational strongholds, why not award the degree at the time of admission? Thereafter, the emphasis would be on learning. (Certification would then become the problem of the strongholds and not of the colleges.)

14. Does all graduate work require the four years of undergraduate preparation we now demand? In some fields, some individuals may be able to do work at the graduate level of quality at age 16 or 18.

15. Do all medical doctors have to be trained in the same way? Do we now waste time giving doctors education in areas they do not need? Does a psychiatrist need to know the anatomy of the foot? (If so, how often does he use such knowledge?)

16. What value has a college transcript after ten years? It can show degrees and dates of attendance, but do grades received 10 or 20 years ago tell us anything about the man or woman now?

In the recent past, a variety of models have been suggested, some utopian, some pragmatic. The Walden-ites have given up hope for us all but think they can save a few. (I am pessimistic enough to think that if the holocaust ever comes even Shangri-La will not escape the blast or the fumes.) We have proposals for universities without walls or classrooms, or for the city as the university. William Birenbaum's College in the City fills in the empty chinks and does not level great blocks for more of the same massive campuses. Constantinos Doxiadis has proposed an ideal community size and environment and says our model of the university must be integrated with that of the good city. The Harrad Experiment, a novel of some years back, prophetically explored the model of the co-ed dormitory, with random pairings of girls and boys, and found (or imagined) better human beings coming out at the other end. Whatever its failures as a novel, the Harrad Experiment did make an interesting point by relaying the story through the diaries of the girls and boys--the experiment was as they saw it and not as the experimenters saw it.

It is difficult to experiment with human beings in any really fundamental ways because we cannot shrug off failures and because we (the experimenters) may be heavily dependent on the wills and perceptions of our subjects. The courage to experiment requires either mass persuasion or a totalitarian form of government. The experimental model which has emerged in prominence in the past decade is of the college or university as a laboratory, as a continual experiment, the character of which changes from period to period, with short cycles or irregular period lengths. One of the models most likely to be resisted by classical academic man is one which never settles down into the routine he so dearly loves.

In casting about for new models for higher education, we must avoid thinking only of alternative structures, patterns, physical plants, sequences, etc. We must also think of alternative purposes for higher education: each kind of purpose generates alternative criteria.

One hears a great deal today about the need for relevance. As Alvin M. Weinberg (Science, 167, 9 Jan. '70, p. 144) says, our universities "are increasingly preoccupied with their own relevance." But the difficulty with using relevance as a criterion is that it quickly leads us to the question--whose relevance? To illustrate: One widely accepted purpose of higher education--it is also, I might add, a widely criticized one--is to create skilled manpower for the economy and for the professions. Two centuries ago, the colleges prepared people for the law, for the church, for medicine, for teaching, and for the life of a gentleman. To have questioned the relevance of the classical curriculum would have seemed absurd. If one had to defend, say, the teaching of Latin, as we have had to do in this century, one fell back on the notion that it trained the mind or that it helped develop a better vocabulary.

Whose relevance, indeed. Those who need engineers regard the engineering curriculum as very relevant. I am told that even much of the curriculum in medicine is relevant. Number theory is relevant for a computer scientist and completely irrelevant (probably) for a poet or farmer. If we threw out everything irrelevant, what would happen to music, chess, mountain climbing, astronomy, archaeology, and other luxuries of the mind and body?

When the word relevance comes up among older or conservative academicians, there is an evident mixture of contempt and exasperation. In an older time, for example, Latin had a value in itself and need not be justified by relevance--though in a still earlier time, the clergy needed it to read the Bible. But things or disciplines which have value in themselves don't need to be justified--anymore than one needs to justify health, good manners, or kindness. Relevance indeed! The very idea! If pushed far enough, a candid defender of the old view might huff that the liberal arts curriculum is/was relevant to being a gentleman and a civilized human being. I suspect that the older generation, the one on the other side of that horrendous gap, finds its opinion subtly confirmed by the fact that the youthful agitators who scream about relevance do not act like gentlemen! I'm not sure such prejudice would be acknowledged, but it makes sense to assume it exists.

As an alternative, we could take recreation as an objective: To enjoy life. In addition to educating people for leisure, one could think of education as leisure, as a recreation, which, it has been observed, it already is for the kind of graduate student who would like to put off finishing his Ph.D. forever.

Another alternative objective might be the provision of shelter to certain sectors of the population. The college or university could be regarded as a kind of voluntary detention camp for those who might be troublesome or end up in more expensive institutions such as jails or asylums. Surely, people already in the labor market would have no objection to keeping their potential competitors penned up in educational institutions indefinitely. Gathered into collegiate compounds, drug users might be much more manageable--and at lower cost to society. The unemployed can perhaps gain more from lounging around in classrooms than on street corners.

Another approach to finding alternative models for higher education--one that is somewhat related to thinking about different possible purposes--is to use the goals of man or of a subset of human beings as the model. One begins with a definition of the ultimate output and them works back logically to what is implied for curriculum, facilities, methodology, cost, etc. The basic goal of the early Christians was to save man's soul, and everything was designed to define and achieve salvation. The liberal arts model is the logical product of deciding to produce a civilized gentleman--nothing too much, know thyself, the world is so full of a number of things, keep cool.

One alternative model strives for productivity--good engineers, people who can do and make things and keep the machinery of a complex society oiled and humming.

The latest alternative which has caught my fancy is the model generated by the goal of survival. John Fisher (EASY CHAIR) portrayed "Survival University." Take as your goal not only your own survival but man's, in the face of all the hazards man has created: nuclear weapons, air and water pollution, overpopulation (the logical result of better nutrition and control of disease), noise, overcrowding, hard drugs, DDT, and a host of pressures which drive men mad. It is no longer a question of survival of the fittest. The Darwinian process was relatively gentle and leisurely--species took their time dying out or triumphing. Now the fittest of all the species, man, who has helped so many species to disappear, appears unable to survive if he isn't careful. Some lone idiot with a telephone can start the nuclear apocalypse. If one takes seriously the threat of man's disapprearance, by his own hand, and if one asserts that action in time can prevent it, then one can organize a whole poisoning of the biosphere, clean up the mess; one can perhaps train mankind en masse to save themselves (literally) and condition men always to respond so that life will not be seared or smothered to death. How did we get in this mess (history)? What will it cost to clean it up (economics)? How can we communicate the urgency (all media and the arts)? How can we organize (political science, law, administration)? How can we repair the damage (all kinds of engineering, medicine, environmental design)? And so on.

Still another approach to laying out alternatives is to use other institutions as metaphors. There is a classic story about an old professor's saying that he and his colleagues could all dry up and blow away and there would still be a university as long as the library remained. (With the understood invitation, Come and get it!)

The cafeteria, then, or the self-service supermakret is a possibility. One goes to the learining center, picks up a mediaguide, and finds ther a shopping list, with standard appetizers and entrees, specials of the month, staples, desserts, and intoxicants, in various weights and packagings. Self-selected, the program of each person involves a multiplicity of media--books (some given away, because it is cheaper than to access them and keep track of circulation--or because an attempt is being made to create pride in owning things of the mind), tape recorder cassettes, a computer station with a cathode ray tube, an excursion, a studio, a local museum, the waterfront, a city hall office--whatever is needed. If the course has prerequisites, let the learner discover the need for them and remedy his deficiency on his own hook.

This metaphor need not mean that individual students work all alone; groups can form and labor be divided. There are some implications which startle and alarm: Suppose we asked students to pay for the cost of the product actually received and

not of the average? (The further implication is that federal or other public support should be given to students and that a buyer's market should then be allowed to develop.) Our present way of charging tuition at low or nominal rates is equivalent to taking the average price of everything in the supermarket and then charging for every item at that price. The analogy is shaky, especially when one considers that certain items are high priced but not necessarily widely desired; the fact that--say, poultry husbandry may be the most expensive undergraduate curriculum does not mean that a lot of students would want to major in it. Though many assume that wines are likely to be more desirable if more costly, the same is not true in education. Personal interest would still govern choice--assuming that the cost to the individual is what he can afford and that the remaining actual cost is picked up by the state.

Associated with the cafeteria/supermarket model, and perhaps necessary to it, is the Inspection Station. After the candidate has shopped at the educational supermart until he has found and exploited a program, and when he feels ready for a given degree or certification, he shows up at the Station for inspection. He may take tests, written or oral; he may have to perform at some level of competency; or he may show off his paintings or other products of craft. In a really cautious world, especially in human service occupations or in those occupations where skill grows stale, he might have to bring himself back, as we bring our automobiles back in many states, for periodic checkups.

Not everyone likes cafeterias or supermarkets. Thus, we still have restaurants, where customers are waited on and don't have to think very much, and small neighborhood grocery stores, where the customer trusts the grocer and butcher to take care of him and deliver their products to his home door. Similarly, some of the new models might cater a little more to the student, offer him packaged complete dinners, guide him to the choice of appropriate refreshment, and even offer him personal counseling.

It has been suggested that every citizen might well be given a booklet of tickets (actual or figurative) that will entitle him to so and so many units of education, expendable anywhere and at any time in his life. He may choose to go to work after high school, or get married and have children, or see the world, and then to pick up education as the spirit moves him. If he does well, he may earn prizes that enable him to go on to advanced levels. In certain critical professions, a new kind of sabbatical may develop--one that allows lawyers, physicians, architects, politicians, engineers, et al. to return to the learning center for a period of retraining and updating. (By the time of that millennium, I expected the faculty will have achieved the ultimate in reverse sabbaticals; they will be off seven years and teach one.) Use of such credits throughout a lifetime implies nothing about where they might be spent--whether in institutions as they are now or in the ultimate supermarkets.

A conceptual model which is likely to horrify the liberally educated, humane arts-and letters type is the college or university as factory or processing plant--or computer. In this model, the student is raw material, so is knowledge, and they are all input. Then transformations are worked on the inputs, and there is a memory, and a control unit, and the processor. Finally, there is at the other end of the plant or machine a steady stream of outputs--human beings, packaged and labeled, stuffed with knowledges and skills and attitudes and consumer proclivities. If we

don't like the product, change the inputs or the processing! Just tell me what it is you want, says the engineer/educator, and I will give it to you. If you can't tell me what kind of human being, or human society, you want in place of the one we have, how in hell can I redesign the machine to give you what you want? (The assumption, held both by some educators and by the general public and its leaders, is that it is possible to design a machine to produce any given product if you will simply describe what is desired. Yankee ingenuity will find a way). This model may be the one that so many people don't like; worse, it may not correspond to reality, present or potential.

In our haste to be flexible and responsive, we may simply look opportunistic. We become urban-conscious, or unhappy about pollution, because there are dollars which Uncle Sugar might five us to work on the problems. Clark Kerr either warned or bragged, depending on your view, about this kind of utilitarian, perverse model. My own metaphor for the purely reality-oriented model is the little shop not far from my house which has signs indicating KEYS MADE, INSURANCE, REAL ESTATE, NOTARY PUBLIC, ANTIQUES, KNIVES SHARPENED, LENDING LIBRARY, PIZZA. The owner is willing to do anything to get a customer.

In almost every instance, we tend to play with the institutional variables: How to process what people in terms of what output goals and input parameters and so on. Education is the end as well as the means. What happens if we think of education, not as a result but as a process? What would happen if we took as a major objective the perfection not of the performance but of the rehearsal?

As long as we think of people coming to the institution and "getting (acquiring) an education" we think of education as something to have or to be had. The motto of the University of California's Extension Division is "Lifelong Learning." Well, one can say, I don't need to go to school to keep on learning. Right, provided that lifelong learning is an objective of education--which one cannot take for granted. The expression "he'll never learn" means "he already has." One model of universal higher education envisions everybody involved in post-secondary education. Another sees an erosion of the difference between the education process and the daily life of men and women. Education lies all about us, like radio waves which must be transformed to be perceived. Similarly, "education" in the present formal sense might be what turns us all into sensitizers and amplifiers of the education everywhere present. The word "commencement" might then take on or resume more meaning.

If we specify all the variables we can play with, we can generate through many permutations and combinations a great variety of models; we have in fact already gone through such a developmental process and have as a result a variety ('great' or 'limited', depending on your view) of institutional types. We can vary any one or more of the following:

Instructional technology--class size, presentation, evaluation.
Schedules and sequences.
Ways of paying the costs of education.
Selection, guidance, counseling of students.
Physical environments.
Governance, administration, management.
Selection and reward of staff.
Types of institutional ownership.
Independence and autonomy.
Institutional size and human mix.
Evaluation and certification methods (accreditation, grading).
What is to be taught by each sector (home, school, church).
Etc.

One set of alternative models is generated by playing with the notion that education, as well as training, can legitimately be a profit-making venture. The Marjorie Webster case, even if it passes all the present court hurdles, will not really answer all the questions about the proprietary model. The principal point contested so far is whether the school has the right to be considered for accreditation.

A corollary of the for-profit or proprietary model is the notion of dispensing entirely with accreditation. It sounds horrible, I know, but it might be useful to imagine what would happen if accreditation either did not exist or did not matter. If one really wants to be a writer or doctor or TV repairman or car salesman, his principal concern is to master the craft, get his license to practice, and get cracking on the road to success. At present, more attention is paid to a recognized credential from a recognized licensing or credentialing agency than to competence, especially as we become less sure about our capacity to judge competence.

One element of technique which made the scientific novels of H.G. Wells, so fascinating was his trick of taking some ridiculous and impossible notion--being invisible, traveling in time, an invasion form Mars--and then, in effect, saying All right, but suppose it did happen--what then? If you're invisible, it turns out, you're still noticeable. To avoid startling people by the appearance of an empty suit of clothes, you have to go about naked, and in cold weather that becomes a problem. And so on.

We may have to think through the results of the apparent ridiculousness of casting out everything we now take for granted about accreditation and certification if the non-profit models of the past and present do not meet the needs of the future. Proprietary colleges are not afraid to charge full costs, to teach 50 weeks a year, from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., to require that teaching be competent and that students behave themselves, to reward loyalty to the institution more than loyalty to the craft union, and to be "relevant" in meeting local community needs. The admissions officer for an ivy league college, traveling about the land and extolling the virtues of Old Ivybarn, is no less a huckster because he works for a 401 (c) (3) employer. The proprietary college which doesn't train its students to meet industry standards and to get and hold jobs soon gets no more students and goes out of business. It would be fun to go on belaboring this model, and I think there is some illumination in it, but I hope the point has been made: If we want to develop alternative models, we must take nothing for granted as being inherently virtuous or corrupt. I firmly believe that if one could "sell" a proprietary college which could really deliver at the end of two or three years what Harvard or Yale delivers at the end of four, at whatever cost, and even though the proprietary college could not offer an "accredited" degree, there would be takers--and bright ones. Young people today are casting about for new models. They do not all share our preoccupation with certified elites. Many of what we take for granted as "values" in the old models, are being questioned.

Whatever happens, let me hazard the prediction that there will be more alternatives in the future than are considered tolerable now. The master of a medieval university could never have envisioned our present variety of collegiate models. We will not have to decide which ones are best for everybody. The greatest alternative of all, the master alternative, is to provide a wide range of alternative paths to higher education--and of definitions of what "higher education" means. Even permanence is not sacred. As William Arrowsmith says (Boston University Journal, 17:2-3, pp. 30-38, 1969), "We need to encourage informal academic combinations which can be set up or dismantled as occasions or resources indicate."

Unfortunately, much of this is dream-talk. If private or public non-profit models, rooted in the past and legitimized more by inertia and tradition than by logic or present quality, will not serve, new laternatives will be thrust upon us. Some of them may be more attractive than others, and while we have some time in which to lead, to get ahead of the game, we had better do as much speculating and experimenting as we can. All this discussion about current models and future alternatives will ultimately cease to be academic. Whatever models ultimately survive, it would be pleasant to claim that we had had some choice or influence in the design-decisions.